

Excursus: Israel's Role in the History of Redemption – The Biblical Pattern of Divine-Human Interplay

Isaiah's commission, when interpreted within the Old Testament preparatory salvation history and New Testament fulfillment, provides an important and compelling example of the way the Scripture treats the interplay between human volition and activity and God's sovereign oversight and administration of His creation. Specifically, this passage (as part of the broader context) highlights Israel's essential, divinely predetermined role in God's outworking of His eternal purpose in Christ, but as that role depended entirely upon the nation's willful and unyielding contradiction of its covenant Father and its own covenant identity and calling as Yahweh's son.

1. Again, God's covenant relationship with Abraham was the basis of Israel's election and consecration as His *first-born son* (cf. Exodus 4:22 and Hosea 11:1 with Isaiah 1:1-4; 30:1-17, etc.). Israel's covenant sonship was determined and ordered by Abraham's unique covenant status and God's purpose that global restoration and reconciliation – in the language of the Abrahamic Covenant, all the earth's families entering into His blessing – were to come through Abraham's offspring. Israel was that covenant "seed" in corporate form, and this covenant status established the nation's unique identity and role with respect to Yahweh, itself, and the world of men. *By divine design, Israel was the focal point in God's accomplishment of His eternal purpose for His creation.*

So Israel was obligated to be *Israel* – the human entity that had prevailed with God (Genesis 32:24-28) and, from its unique vantage point and privilege as *son of God*, was to mediate the knowledge of Him to the world of men alienated from Him. But Israel failed perpetually in its covenant responsibility, though Yahweh showed Himself lavish and constant in His commitment to love and provide for His covenant son. From Egypt onward Israel's Father had done everything to ensure its fruitfulness, but all to no avail. Israel would not and could not be Israel, and this brought two crucial consequences:

- a. First, God divided the Israelite kingdom – the kingdom promised to Abraham and realized under David, thereby initiating its inexorable decline toward ruination. Both sub-kingdoms (Israel and Judah) were destined for destruction and exile; though Yahweh continued to plead for His son's repentance, desolation was inevitable. Replicating the plight of their forefathers (Hosea 11:1-5), both houses of Israel were doomed for exile and captivity outside the covenant land.
- b. Second, Israel's failure – considered from the perspective of the divine oath to Abraham – resulted in Yahweh's appointment of a *new Israel* (Isaiah 49:1-6). Failed Israel would give birth to a faithful counterpart: a singular seed of Abraham in whom Yahweh would fulfill His purpose of global restoration and reconciliation. Thus, while God promised the recovery of a Judean remnant from exile and the rebuilding of the holy city and its sanctuary, this temporal restoration only prefigured and affirmed the true restoration to come: the purging and restoration of all things when the Son of David came and established His everlasting kingdom (cf. Isaiah 44:24-45:7; Jeremiah 29:1-14, 30:1-33:26; Daniel 7:1-14; Hosea 1:1-3:5; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 6:9-15; Malachi 3:1-5).

2. The above considerations are essential to interpreting Isaiah's vision and commission; to simply turn to that passage and attempt to derive – or support – from it a particular theology of God's sovereignty is grossly irresponsible and fatally flawed. Isaiah's commission and the curse he was to pronounce upon Israel presupposed and drew upon an historical backdrop, a present situation and set of circumstances, and a future direction and outcome. As is the case with every biblical context, *the proper interpretation of this passage – and therefore the correct derivation of theological conclusions from it – depends entirely upon locating and reading it within the unfolding scriptural storyline* (that is, its salvation-historical context). The reason is that God has chosen to reveal Himself and His purposes through His actions and activity in the world and His subsequent interpretation of them (both by further actions and the word of His prophets).

So in this Isaianic context God's pronouncement of desolation and exile focuses on Israel's historical and covenantal circumstance, namely its hopeless and culpable failure to fulfill its Abrahamic identity and calling as "son of God." *Yahweh was condemning Israel, not because it had broken a list of commandments, but because it had denied its very sonship and thereby threatened the realization of His promises to Abraham and, through him, to the world.* Israel had despised and effectively renounced its identity and calling, but God's covenant oath would stand. In spite of itself, Israel's election and calling were irrevocable because the One who promised is faithful and true (Romans 11:28-29); the chosen "son" would indeed fulfill its Abrahamic calling as conduit of divine blessing to all the families of the earth, and it would do so *by means of* its unbelief and rejection as much as in spite of it.

- a. First of all, Israel would fulfill its calling by giving birth to the promised seed of Abraham – the true Israel in whom Israel was to realize its own identity, fullness and destiny (cf. Genesis 3:15, 49:8-10 with Psalm 14; Isaiah 49:1ff; Micah 5:2; John 4:22; Revelation 12:1-5; cf. also Galatians 4:4).
- b. Jesus Christ is the True Israel and Son of Abraham, but He is accomplishing His work of mediating His Father's blessing to all the nations through the Abrahamic nation of Israel. He is doing so in two ways, one positive and one negative.
 - The positive means is through *believing* Israel – that is Jesus' Jewish disciples to whom He entrusted the gospel of the kingdom and who became the foundation of the composite Church (Matthew 28:18-20; John 15:26-27; Acts 1:1-8, 2:1-47; Ephesians 2:19-20).
 - So the negative means is through *unbelieving* Israel. It was precisely Jewish rejection and hostility that God determined to use as the primary initial instrument for moving His gospel outward to the nations. Thus even Israel's obstinate refusal to embrace its covenant sonship couldn't keep it from fulfilling its divine calling to be Yahweh's agent in bringing His blessing to all of the earth's families (cf. Acts 8:1-4 and 13:44-52, 18:1-6, 19:8-10, 28:23-28 with Romans 9:1-29).

3. Israel's failure was a predetermined part of God's purpose, yet He continually set in front of His "son" its solemn obligation to fulfill its unique and privileged identity and thereby realize its righteousness and the blessedness of being Israel indeed. Yahweh withheld nothing good and necessary to Israel's success, including His fatherly chastening and continual mercy, forgiveness and restoring favor in the face of the nation's failures. (This pattern of interaction between covenant Father and son is powerfully highlighted in the book of Judges.) Thus Yahweh could exempt Himself from all accusation and culpability in Israel's failure to be Israel; the guilt – and worthiness of judgment – were entirely its own and self-inflicted (Isaiah 5:1-7; Ezekiel 18:1-32).

This dynamic of divine-human interplay isn't limited to the present Isaiah context or a handful of other scriptural instances; it is the normative pattern everywhere attested throughout the Scriptures. A few further examples make the point:

- a. The place to start is the beginning and the fall of man. The calamity of Eden was absolutely predetermined by God; otherwise, creational redemption and restoration, Jesus as the Last Adam, and the summing up of everything in the heavens and earth in Him were simply an afterthought – a post-fall remedy to recover what God had previously regarded as finished and consummately perfect. Were the fall not predetermined, how could Paul speak of the grace of God's salvation in Christ being granted to us *from all eternity* (2 Timothy 1:8-9)? At the same time, God in no way or to any extent tempted or otherwise influenced Adam and Eve toward His sovereignly decreed outcome; quite the opposite, He gave Himself fully to them along with every natural blessing and provision – and added to it a positive command – all to dissuade them from that fateful course.
- b. The Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus supplies a second excellent example. Yahweh had determined to "harden Pharaoh's heart" – that is, to hold him back from releasing the children of Israel except under the compulsion of the plague of the death of the firstborn (Exodus 4:21-23). The reason was the Lord's predetermined purpose that the Egyptian redemption through the Passover and the death of the first-born should serve as the primary picture and prototype of His ultimate redemption and "second Exodus" (Isaiah 51:1-16, esp. vv. 9-11).

Yahweh bound Pharaoh's heart in opposition to Him, yet Pharaoh's hardness of heart was self-inflicted (ref. Exodus 8:1-11:10). The Egyptian king hardened his own heart – not against a God who refused to reveal Himself and His intentions, but against the gracious Lord who afforded him the same essential revelation through the mouth of Moses as He brought to His covenant sons (cf. Exodus 3:13-17 with 5:1-2). From first to last, Pharaoh's guilt was his own.

- c. A third example is Saul, Israel's first king. Though Saul was a man after Israel's own heart – a king suited to their sensibilities, Yahweh is the One who chose him to be king over His people (1 Samuel 9:1-10:1). God selected Saul to rule in His name and authority though his failure was a foregone conclusion; he could not be the true king of Israel, if for no other reason than his descent from Benjamin.

Saul's failure and rejection were necessary in light of Yahweh's choice of David to be His king and the great regal prototype of the Ruler to come (ref. again Genesis 49:10-12 and the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7). Nevertheless, God had Samuel anoint Saul with the pledge of divine blessing upon his house and kingdom on the condition of his faithfulness – that is, his integrity in fulfilling his calling. Far from tempting Saul or inducing him to fail, Yahweh afforded him the opportunity to fulfill His goal of having a faithful son-king rule in His name over His covenant house (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Had Saul succeeded, he would have realized the blessing of an everlasting kingdom (1 Samuel 13:1-13). Saul's failure was written into the divine plan, and yet he could lay no blame at God's feet.

- d. Perhaps the most compelling example – and the one most closely associated with the Isaiah context – is the way the sons of Israel responded to Jesus of Nazareth during His earthly ministry. Though many believed in Him, the vast majority of Israelites rejected Him as an imposter. Here, too, this national unbelief and rejection were divinely determined; God's design was that wicked hands should put His Son to death, but as a sacrificial offering according to His "predetermined plan and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:22-23, 4:8-11, 23-28). So it was with Judas Iscariot, the son of perdition, already taken note of in the Scripture as the betrayer of the Lord of life (cf. Matthew 26:24-25; John 13:1-18, 17:12; Acts 1:15-20). Even the chosen and beloved Eleven, men who would go on to be the foundation of Christ's Church, were guilty of an act of unbelief that itself was a matter of predetermined fulfillment (cf. Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31).

In each of these cases the individuals' actions were scripturally anticipated and so preordained. And yet their actions were fully their own and therefore fully culpable: Jesus presented the same truth and self-revelation to those having eyes to see and those lacking them (John 10:22ff); so Judas enjoyed the same privilege and outpouring of love from Jesus as the other Eleven. Judas was so much one of the Twelve that no one among them could identify him when Jesus revealed that one of them was about to betray Him (Matthew 26:21-22; cf. John 13:21-22).

- e. A final example is men's rejection of the gospel. Jesus insisted that all who come to Him have been given to Him by His Father, and yet men refuse to believe because they love darkness rather than light (cf. John 1:9-13, 3:1-21, 5:36-47, 6:25-29, 35-45, 60-65 with 15:18-25; cf. also Acts 7:51-53, 13:44-48, 18:4-6, 19:8-9; Romans 9:30-10:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-14).

This scheme of divine-human interplay applies to every aspect of human existence: *God never concedes any degree or aspect of His absolute sovereignty, but neither does He assume the least responsibility for any man's unbelief or condemnation.*

This dynamic is equally true for Christians as well as non-Christians:

- 1) Non-Christians don't have a living, Spirit-imparted knowledge of God and His gospel, but they are still culpable for their unbelief and opposition to divine truth.

They are culpable because essential truths about God – and therefore about themselves as image-bearers – are stamped upon the creation and graven upon their souls (Romans 1:18-23). Men are not devoid of divine truth; they *suppress* it in their unrighteousness. Even where they don't overtly oppose God and His gospel, they do so intrinsically by their insistence upon establishing their own righteousness – whether through personal philosophy/spirituality, formal religion or the perversion of the Christian gospel.

- 2) Christians share in Christ's life and mind, but this doesn't mean that they don't also always do what they choose to do. Under the best scenario when their thoughts, judgments and decisions correspond to and comply with the Spirit's leading, those operations of their minds are still their own. (So it was with Jesus, who insisted that to see *Him* was to see the Father: His thoughts, judgments, words and works so perfectly corresponded to the mind of His Father that He could insist that they *were* the Father's.)

So, on the opposite extreme, Christians can neglect or even deny the mind of Christ in them and the Spirit's leading such that their thoughts, judgments and determinations proceed from the "old man," and thereby resist and grieve (or possibly even quench) the Spirit. This means that a Christian cannot conclude that, simply because he seriously and "prayerfully" pondered something and reached a conclusion, his conclusion amounts to the Spirit's leading. In perhaps most instances Christians end up scripting the Spirit into their own agenda; they hear only their own voice because no other voice is permitted.

There are two primary implications of this dynamic – one negative and one positive:

- 1) The negative implication is that every human being – Christian as well as non-Christian – is fully and solely culpable for his own decisions, choices and actions. *God's sovereignty doesn't imply a fatalistic, cause-and-effect form or structure to the human world.*
- 2) On the positive side, our choices and actions cannot impair, impede, alter or overthrow God's ultimate purposes for either us individually or the rest of His creation.
 - Our agreement and compliance aren't necessary or determinative in God's accomplishment of His will or its ultimate fruitfulness.
 - So our weakness, failures and even contrariness don't jeopardize God's work in us and its final fruition (Philippians 1:6). Rather, the Spirit is using those failings to perfect Jesus' life and likeness in us (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1ff, 12:1-10).

At the same time, our full culpability means that our choices and actions do matter. *Our lives matter, and all the more so as we have our lives "hidden with Christ in God"*: The fact that our lives are Christ's perfect humanity being formed and lived out in us means that we are obligated to "get over ourselves"; we must die to the old man and what we think is life and put on the new *Christified* man (Matthew 10:34-39; John 12:23-26; Ephesians 4:20-24). But we are equally obligated to make much of Christ *in us*: Christians aren't merely informed and committed people; the Spirit is perfecting in them the life and likeness of Christ Himself. They have been given everything pertaining to life and godliness; they have no excuse and will give an account.